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| http://condor.depaul.edu/dsimpson/tlove/drama.gif**Comedy and Tragedy** | http://condor.depaul.edu/dsimpson/tlove/shakes.gif |

[Quiz](http://condor.depaul.edu/dsimpson/tlove/tcquiz.html)

<http://condor.depaul.edu/dsimpson/tlove/comic-tragic.html>

    Comedy

    According to Aristotle (who speculates on the matter in his *Poetics*), ancient comedy originated with the *komos*, a curious and improbable spectacle in which a company of festive males apparently sang, danced, and cavorted rollickingly around the image of a large phallus.  (If this theory is true, by the way, it gives a whole new meaning to the phrase "stand-up routine.")

    Accurate or not, the linking of the origins of comedy to some sort of phallic ritual or festival of mirth seems both plausible and appropriate, since for most of its history--from Aristophanes to Seinfeld--comedy has involved a high-spirited celebration of human sexuality and the triumph of eros. As a rule, tragedies occur on the battlefield or in a palace's great hall; a more likely setting for comedy is the bedroom or bathroom.

    On the other hand, it's not true that a film or literary work must involve sexual humor or even be funny in order to qualify as a comedy. A happy ending is all that's required. In fact, since at least as far back as Aristotle, the basic formula for comedy has had more to do with conventions and expectations of plot and character than with a requirement for lewd jokes or cartoonish pratfalls. In essence: **A comedy is a story of the rise in fortune of a sympathetic central character.**

**The comic hero**

    Of course this definition doesn't mean that the main character in a comedy has to be a spotless hero in the classic sense. It only means that she (or he) must display at least the minimal level of personal charm or worth of character it takes to win the audience's basic approval and support. The rise of a completely worthless person or the triumph of an utter villain is not comical; it's the stuff of gothic fable or dark satire. On the other hand, judging from the qualities displayed by many of literature's most popular comic heroes (e.g., Falstaff, Huck Finn) audiences have no trouble at all pulling for a likeable rogue or fun-loving scamp.

    Aristotle suggests that comic figures are mainly "average to below average" in terms of moral character, perhaps having in mind the wily servant or witty knave who was already a stock character of ancient comedy. He also suggests that only low or ignoble figures can strike us as ridiculous. However, the most ridiculous characters are often those who, although well-born, are merely pompous or self-important instead of truly noble. Similarly, the most sympathetic comic figures are frequently plucky underdogs, young men or women from humble or disadvantaged backgrounds who prove their real worth--in effect their "natural nobility"--through various tests of character over the course of a story or play.

**Ordinary People**

    Traditionally, comedy has to do with the concerns and exploits of ordinary people. The characters of comedy therefore tend to be plain, everyday figures (e.g., lower or middle-income husbands and wives, students and teachers, children and parents, butchers, bakers, and candlestick-makers ) instead of the kings, queens, heroes, plutocrats, and heads of state who form the *dramatis personae* of tragedy. Comic plots, accordingly, tend to be about the kind of problems that ordinary people are typically involved with: winning a new boyfriend (or reclaiming an old one), succeeding at a job, passing an exam, getting the money needed to pay for a medical operation, or simply coping with a bad day. Again, the true hallmark of comedy isn't always laughter. More often, it's the simple satisfaction we feel when we witness deserving people succeed.

**Types of Comedies**

    Comedies can be separated into at least three subordinate categories or sub-genres--identified and briefly characterized as follows:

* **Farce.**The identifying features of farce are zaniness, slapstick humor, and hilarious improbability. The characters of farce are typically fantastic or absurd and usually far more ridiculous than those in other forms of comedy. At the same time, farcical plots are often full of wild coincidences and seemingly endless twists and complications. Elaborate comic intrigues involving deception, disguise, and mistaken identity are the rule. Examples of the genre include Shakespeare's *Comedy of Errors,* the "Pink Panther" movies, and the films of the Marx Brothers and Three Stooges.
* **Romantic Comedy**. Perhaps the most popular of all comic forms--both on stage and on screen--is the romantic comedy. In this genre the primary distinguishing feature is a love plot in which two sympathetic and well-matched lovers are united or reconciled. In a typical romantic comedy the two lovers tend to be young, likeable, and apparently meant for each other, yet they are kept apart by some complicating circumstance (e.g., class differences, parental interference; a previous girlfriend or boyfriend) until, surmounting all obstacles, they are finally wed. A wedding-bells, fairy-tale-style happy ending is practically mandatory. Examples: *Much Ado about Nothing*, Walt Disney's *Cinderella*, *Guys and Dolls*, *Sleepless in Seattle*.
* **Satirical Comedy.** The subject of satire is human vice and folly. Its characters include con-artists, criminals, tricksters, deceivers, wheeler-dealers, two-timers, hypocrites, and fortune-seekers and the gullible dupes, knaves, goofs, and cuckolds who serve as their all-too-willing victims. Satirical comedies resemble other types of comedy in that they trace the rising fortune of a central character. However, in this case, the central character (like virtually everybody else in the play or story) is likely to be cynical, foolish, or morally corrupt. Examples: Aristophanes's *The Birds*, Ben Jonson's *Volpone.* In its most extreme forms (e.g., the movies*Fargo* and *Pulp Fiction*), satirical comedy spills over into so-called **Black comedy**--where we're invited to laugh at events that are mortifying or grotesque.

**Tragedy**

    In essence, tragedy is the mirror image or negative of comedy. For instead of depicting the rise in circumstances of a dejected or outcast underdog, tragedy shows us the downfall of a once prominent and powerful hero. Like comedy, tragedy also supposedly originated as part of a religious ritual--in this case a Dionysian ceremony with dancers dressed as goats or animals (hence *tragoedia*, literally a "goat-song) pantomiming the suffering or death-rebirth of a god or hero.

**Aristotelian Tragedy**.

    Once again, the most influential theorist of the genre is Aristotle, whose *Poetics* has guided the composition and critical interpretation of tragedy for more than two millenia. Distilling the many  penetrating remarks contained in this commentary, we can derive the following general definition: **Tragedy depicts the downfall of a basically good person through some fatal error or misjudgment, producing suffering and insight on the part of the protagonist and arrousing pity and fear on the part of the audience.**

    To explain this definition further, we can state the following principles or general requirements for Aristotelian tragedy: 

* **A true tragedy should evoke pity and fear on the part of the audience**.  According to Aristotle, pity and fear are the natural human response to spectacles of pain and suffering--especially to the sort of suffering that can strike anybody at any time. Aristotle goes on to say that tragedy effects "the *catharsis*of these emotions"--in effect arrousing pity and fear only to purge them, as when we exit a scary movie feeling relieved or exhilarated.
* **The tragic hero must be essentially admirable and good**. As Aristotle points out, the fall of a scoundrel or villain evokes applause rather than pity. Audiences cheer when the bad guy goes down. On the other hand, the downfall of an essentially good person disturbs us and stirs our compassion. As a rule, the nobler and more truly admirable a person is, the greater will be our anxiety or grief at his or her downfall.
* **In a true tragedy, the hero's demise must come as a result of some personal error or decision**. In other words, in Aristotle's view there is no such thing as an innocent *victim*of tragedy, nor can a genuinely tragic downfall ever be purely a matter of blind accident or bad luck. Instead, authentic tragedy must always be the product of some fatal choice or action, for the tragic hero must always bear at least some responsibility for his own doom.

**Critical Terms**

***Anagnorisis*** ("tragic recognition or insight"): according to Aristotle, a moment of clairvoyant  insight or understanding in the mind of the tragic hero as he suddenly comprehends the web of fate that he has entangled himself in.

***Hamartia*** ("tragic error"):  a fatal error or simple mistake on the part of the protagonist that eventually leads to the final catastrophe. A metaphor from archery,*hamartia* literally refers to a shot that misses the bullseye. Hence it need not be an egregious "fatal flaw" (as the term *hamartia* has  traditionally been glossed). Instead, it can be something as basic and inescapable as a simple miscalculation or slip-up.

***Hubris*** ("violent transgression"): the sin par excellence of the tragic or over-aspiring hero. Though it is usually translated as *pride*, *hubris* is probably better understood as a sort of insolent daring, a haughty overstepping of cultural codes or ethical boundaries.

***Nemesis*** ("retribution"): the inevitable punishment or cosmic payback for acts of *hubris*.

***Peripateia*** ("plot reversal"): a pivotal or crucial action on the part of the protagonist that changes his situation from seemingly secure to vulnerable.

**Hegelian Tragedy**

    More than two thousand years after Aristotle's *Poetics*, the German philosopher G.W.F. Hegel (1770-1831) proposed his own original and highly influential theory of tragedy. Unlike Aristotle, who defines tragedy in terms of specific requirements of plot and character, Hegel defines it as, at bottom, a dynamic contest between two opposing forces--in effect, a collision or conflict of rights.

    According to this scheme, the most tragic events are those in which two esteemed values or goals are in opposition and one of them must give way. For instance, suppose in a particular case we find ourselves torn between our private conscientious opinions or religious beliefs and our legitimate duties and obligations to the state. Such would be the circumstance, for example, of a conscientious objector facing military service. And such indeed is the situation of Sophocles's play *Antigone,* whose title heroine finds herself caught between her religious and family obligations and her duties as a public citizen.

    In essence, then, a properly constructed Hegelian tragedy involves **a situation in which two rights or values are in fatal conflict.** Thus it is not (strictly speaking) tragic when good defeats bad or when bad defeats good. From Hegel's point of view, the only tragic confrontation is one in which good is up against good and the contest is to the death.

**Revenge Tragedy**

    There remains one further species of tragedy to define and analyze--namely, *revenge tragedy*, a type that originated in ancient Greece, reached its zenith of popularity in Renaissance London, and which continues to thrill audiences on the silver screen today.

    In general, revenge tragedy dramatizes the predicament of a wronged hero.  A typical scenario is as follows: Your daughter has been brutally raped and murdered; but because of legal technicalities, the killer is allowed to go free. What do you do? Stoically endure your pain? Or take justice into your own hands?  Examples of the revenge theme abound in Greek tragedy (e.g., *Agamemnon*,  *Medea*) and in Elizabethan drama (*Hamlet*, *Titus Andronicus*). The theme is also illustrated in numerous Hollywood westerns and crime thrillers (e.g., *Death Wish*).